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Author(s): George Creel

Source: *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Nov., 1941), pp. 340-351

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2769284>

Accessed: 27/03/2010 12:23

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PROPAGANDA AND MORALE

GEORGE CREEL

ABSTRACT

Since the morale of the front line derives directly from the morale of the civilian population from which the armed forces are drawn, the mind of a nation must be mobilized no less than its man-power. Particularly today, when wars are a trial of strength between opposed ideals as well as opposed armies, public opinion is a major force, and the one sure way to form a steadfast, enduring public opinion is to inform it. Any form of censorship and any attempt to suppress, twist, or conceal will result inevitably in an impairment of the popular confidence that is the very heart of morale. A free people cannot be told what to think but must be given every fact in the case and permitted to do their own thinking. Propaganda—the fight for the promotion and maintenance of morale—can have no other basis than honesty and candor, for in every human being there is an instinct for truth. Tom-tom beating and tribal incantations, built on lies, deceit, corruption, megalomania, and national egotism, may rush a nation into war and whip up passions for a while, but froth and dregs are bound to be the ultimate result. The justice of a nation's cause must be proved and preached, but even that is not enough. If the struggle is to enlist heart and mind and soul, the bloody business of wholesale slaughter must be illumined by the hope of a new and better world-order. Hitler may sneer at the "idealistic note" in propaganda, but it is only to high idealism that free peoples respond.

The relation between propaganda and morale is intimate and inseparable. The "war will" of the civilian population is a nation's second line, and "war will," particularly in a democracy, depends upon the degree to which people can be made to consecrate and concentrate body, soul, and spirit in the supreme effort of service and sacrifice, giving complete assent to the truth that all business is the nation's business and every task a common task for a single purpose. Without national unity, based on high resolves and unfaltering determinations, the courage of the firing line is bound to be weakened, for the morale of the army derives from the morale of the nation of which the army is only the fighting part. Ask any admiral or general, and he will admit that propaganda—the fight for public opinion—is as integral a part of any war machine as ships, guns, and planes. The "mind" of a people must be mobilized as well as its man-power.

There is still another aspect of the question to be considered. Modern wars are a trial of strength between opposed ideals as well as opposed armies, with moral victories having all the value of military decisions. The "verdict of mankind," as Woodrow Wilson put it, is by no means an empty phrase. Propaganda can win either the

friendship or active support of neutral nations and, if based on truth and backed by facts, can even break down enemy morale, both in the front line and behind it.

All of which has been military gospel for centuries. If the campaigns of Caesar, Hannibal, Frederick the Great, Napoleon, and Washington are studied, it will be seen that each one recognized public opinion as a major force. George Washington, in particular, relied heavily on propaganda and placed as much faith in the pen of Thomas Paine as in the muskets of his ragged soldiers. So it is today in this second World War. Goebbels is more the right hand of Adolf Hitler than beefy Goering, for the *Führer* ranks psychological offensives along with his *Panzer* divisions. Winston Churchill's "blood, sweat, and tears" is the very essence of propaganda, and Russia and Italy, albeit blunderingly, work their propagandists overtime.

Before going any further with the discussion, however, there must be some agreement on definition, a clean-cut establishment of difference between meat and poison. When Pope Gregory XV, back in 1622, created the *Congregatio de propaganda fide*, what he had in mind, and all that he had in mind, was the guidance of those sandaled missionaries who went forth from Rome to preach the gospel in foreign fields. The propagation of faith! The spread of Christian doctrine! Just that and nothing else. Today, however, propaganda retains no trace of its original meanings and here in the United States particularly has come to stand only for evil, deceit, and corruption. The reason is not far to find. Throughout the first World War both German and Allied propagandists concentrated on the manufacture of hate, convinced that the "will to win" had its source in the baser emotions. After the Armistice a large majority made printed confession of their activities, some cynically, others boastfully, but all shamelessly. The manufacture of atrocities was confessed, and dishonesties were grinningly admitted and justified as "part of the game." Straightway American opinion, reacting from the intense emotionalism of the war years, made propaganda a whipping boy.

Editors, historians, and publicists, especially those who had been most chauvinistic, hastened to purify their records by furious condemnation. Some saw propaganda as an actual cause of war, and

others, as the corrosive product, but all were a unit in austere and pharisaically demanding its exorcism from American life. It was attacked as the "primary weapon of the world's invisible governments, its microbes infecting humanity like a plague," and as a "new and subtler instrument to weld mankind into one amalgamated mass of hate." George Sylvester Viereck, head of the German drive in the United States prior to 1917, even came forward with an exact definition. "Propaganda," he asserted, "is a campaign camouflaging its origin, its motives or both, conducted for the purpose of obtaining a specific objective by the manipulation of public opinion."

Putting the hysterical and brazen to one side for the moment, there is another objection to propaganda, or rather a distaste, that operates to keep many people, particularly scholars, scientists, and the academic type, on the side lines when controversial issues are involved. The late Stuart P. Sherman, professor of English in the University of Illinois at the time, touched upon it in his *American and Allied Ideals*, a pamphlet, written in 1917. He said:

Most educated Americans have been bred and trained to look with suspicion upon the propagandist. Most of us have been indoctrinated with the ideal which is said to guide the investigator in the fields of science, namely, to follow truth patiently, dispassionately, wherever it leads, without references to its practical consequences. Accordingly, most of us have adopted the attitude of neutral enquirers and expositors. We seek to create the impression that we have no axe to grind. We have accustomed ourselves to studying and presenting our facts with true impartiality, all that there are on one side and all that there are on the other, concealing our point of view, abstaining from advocacy, withholding our conclusions, leaving the verdict to a jury which our own apparent indifference has frequently rendered genuinely indifferent.

To depart from this position of personal reticence and neutrality is for some of us distasteful and for all of us dangerous, unless we know precisely what we are about. To participate, in the fever and excitement of war time, in a zealous campaign for political and cultural ideals is frankly to forsake the still air of delightful studies for the arena of violent and angry passions. It is to be occupied no longer with "mere literature" but with high explosives.¹

So much for the definitions and interpretations of propaganda as set down by those who fear it and distrust it and by others grown sick of returning to their vomit. Instead of advancing a definition of

¹ "War Information Series" (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Public Relations February, 1918), No. 12, pp. 3-4.

my own, let me cite two examples of what I regard as perfect propaganda from every possible point of view, both the work of one who was not only America's first propagandist but indubitably the greatest of all time. Although few historians confess it, even after Lexington and Bunker Hill, the colonists had little real conception of the struggle as a war for independence. The armed protest of America was against evil ministers and unjust laws, and, with these wrongs redressed, the people were eager and willing to resume their allegiance to good King George, the "Father of His People." So matters stood until January, 1776, when suddenly Thomas Paine, a poor, middle-aged, English bankrupt, lighted a fire that bathed the land in flame, burning away moldy traditions and inherited submissions. *Common Sense*, as he called his pamphlet, rose high above haggling and was contemptuous in its dismissal of petty disputes over laws, taxes, and ministers. Strong and clear as the seven trumpets of rams' horns that blew before Jericho, Paine sounded a call for independence in the name of the free states of America.

Since nothing but blows will do, for God's sake let us come to a final separation. Anything short of that is mere patchwork—it is leaving the sword to our children. . . . *Dearly, dearly*, do we pay for the repeal of the acts if that is all we fight for . . . [p. 31]. It is as great a folly to pay a Bunker Hill price for law as for land . . . [p. 22]. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province or a kingdom, but of a continent. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year or an age—posterity are involved in the contest. . . . Now is the seed-time of continental union, faith, and honor—as in absolute governments the king is law, so in free countries the law ought to be king . . . [p. 56]. The continental belt is too loosely buckled . . . independence is the only bond that can tie and keep us together [p. 59].²

The whole theory of monarchy was explained and denied; the evils of England's rule recited; reconciliation was proved to be ruin; and America's chances of victory were honestly weighed. Other appeals followed in quick succession, and General Washington, realizing their "sound doctrine and unanswerable reasoning," urged their circulation to the utmost as invaluable in the stimulation of a sound, dynamic public opinion. Paine's pamphlets, more than any

² *The Writings of Thomas Paine* (from *Common Sense* [Albany, N.Y.: Charles R. and George Webster, 1792]).

other one thing, were responsible for the Declaration of Independence.

Now it was the bitter days of November, 1776, when Washington and his men, like deer before the hounds, fled across New Jersey's frozen marshes, as tattered and demoralized a crew as ever called itself an army. First the disaster at Long Island, due to Israel Putnam's blunders, then the loss of the Hudson River forts, and now this dreary, hopeless flight through a panic-stricken land, its people shamelessly eager to make terms with the British. Gone were the fierce enthusiasms of Concord and Bunker Hill, the glow of the great Declaration, and all that sustained the revolution was the iron fortitude of the commander-in-chief.

The decision to deliver a surprise attack on the Hessians at Trenton was more a resolve born of desperation than any stroke of strategy. Cold, hunger, and exhaustion had turned the troops into stumbling automatons without hope of victory, but as Washington declared in a dispatch, "Necessity, dire necessity, will, nay, *must*, justify any attempt." Only by some bold deed, rich in glory, could the spirit of the colonies be lifted above caution and despondency. It was in the black hours of December 23, while Washington sat gloomily weighing his chances, that a pamphlet fresh from a Philadelphia printing press reached his hands. Again it was Thomas Paine who called to America, and calling in a voice that had the blare of some tremendous clarion.

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country, but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered, yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph; what we obtain too cheap we esteem too lightly; 'tis dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods, and it will be strange indeed if so celestial an article as Freedom should not be highly rated.

Judged from the standpoint of the needs that it was meant to meet, literature holds no finer piece of writing than the first *Crisis* that came white hot from Paine's eagle quill. Now soberly, now ardently, the progress of the war was analyzed and disasters were shown to be the result of popular panic rather than British superior-

ity; Washington's tactics were explained and commended; Howe's successes sneered away as a ravage, not a conquest, and a final call to courage ended on this high note.

By perseverance and fortitude we shall have the prospect of a glorious issue; by cowardice and submission the sad choice of a variety of evils—a ravaged country, a depopulated city, habitations without safety and slavery without hope—our homes turned into barracks and bawdyhouses of Hessians, and a future race to provide for whose fathers we shall have doubts of.

By the leap of his own heart, Washington divined the effect upon his men. Straightway drums were sounded, and the soldiers, divided into groups, listened to Paine's winged words as officers read them by the light of torches. It was as wine to the weary patriots, giving them strength to endure the bitter winter winds that swept the Delaware and whipped them as they stumbled through the snow and sleet on the nine-mile march to Trenton, and when they fell upon Ball's unsuspecting Hessians, the battle cry of every man was "These are the times that try men's souls." Not Rouget de Lisle's "Marseillaise" and not John Zizka's "Ye Who the Lord God's Warrior Are" ever lifted the hearts of men more surely to the stars.

Nor did Trenton's victory mark the limit of effect. As Paine's *Crisis* went from town to town, from hand to hand, confidence succeeded dejection, and soon deserters were returning, new recruits pouring in. The politicians and public men, shamed into an appearance of courage at least, took up their neglected duties, and the people, recovered from panic, braced themselves afresh for the grim struggle. Not once only did this thing happen. At every crucial moment in the Revolution, when the struggle seemed hopeless, when leaders and men despaired, Thomas Paine issued some stirring appeal that went straight to the soul of America; a master propagandist who played upon the hearts of the colonists with strong, sure touch. It is not too much to say that his pen was no less mighty than the sword of Washington, for there would have been no armies to lead, no cause to save, had the "rebellious staymaker" not blown upon the dying fires of patriotism until they blazed again.

As no other, Thomas Paine proved that propagandists do *not* have to lie, do *not* have to preach hate, do *not* have to corrupt, and do *not* have to fall victims to megalomania and national egotism. As

further proof, I offer the two-year record of the Committee on Public Information, America's propaganda agency throughout the first World War. Among our activities may be mentioned the following: more than six thousand separate and distinct news releases, each dealing with a matter of importance; some half-hundred pamphlets, packed with detail and rich in possibilities for error; seventy-five thousand Four-Minute Men speaking nightly from material supplied by the committee; other hundreds delivering more extended addresses on fundamentals; thousands of advertisements prepared for donated space in newspapers and magazines; countless motion and still pictures, posters, and painted signs; war expositions; literature prepared for thirty-three foreign-language groups in the United States; the *Official Bulletin*, appearing daily; and in every capital of the world, outside the Central Powers, offices and representatives served daily by cable and mail services that offered every chance for open lies or honest mistakes. And from first to last only four charges of error and untruthfulness were leveled against the committee, and for all of them we had adequate answers.

From April 14, 1917, to June 1, 1919, the world-wide activities of the committee cost the taxpayer exactly \$4,464,602.39. A small sum compared to the \$10,000,000 that the Office for the Coordination of Cultural and Commercial Relations among the American Republics is now spending in one year on Latin America alone, but large enough at the time to make Congress rage about "waste and extravagance." Just as this charge was disproved, however, so were congressional committees compelled to admit that not one dollar of the amount had ever been sent on a dark and secret errand. Neither at home nor abroad did the committee ever spend a penny on bribes or press subsidies. At no point was there ever the "camouflage of origin or motive," to use Viereck's phrase, but the utmost openness. Always it was our policy to find out what the German propagandists were doing, and then we did not do it. People have an instinct for the truth, and while falsehood and trickery may win for a while, detection and reaction are inevitable in the end.

Just as we stayed away from deceit and corruption, so was the committee at pains to avoid even the appearance of manufacturing hate. We issued no atrocity stories, such as the mutilation of women

and babies, alleged crucifixions, etc., etc., and in spite of British pressure refused to sponsor the Bryce report. The temptation was there, of course, for the baser emotions are far more easily stirred than mental processes. Ask any public man, and he will confess that it is much simpler to make people hate than it is to make them think. Nor was it as if the committee was not implored and even commanded to "strike a more savage note." Senators and congressmen attacked us daily as pacifists and pro-Germans for our failures in this regard; even high officials joined in the chauvinistic chorus, and so-called "patriotic" organizations, of which there were many, bedeviled us with appeals to preach hate. As a result of continued refusals, the American Defense Society wrote a letter protesting that the attitude of the Committee on Public Information was

so pacific that some of its work amounts to giving aid and comfort to the enemy. . . . Furthermore, we believe that the Creel Committee has signally failed to put into the hands of our American soldiers and sailors any publication adequately telling them in plain language what they are fighting for, and why they should hate the enemy they are expected to meet and kill.

In my answer I said:

It is true that this Committee has never preached any doctrine of hate, for it is not our duty to deal in emotional appeals, but to give the people the facts from which conclusions may be drawn. And nothing is more untrue than to say that we have failed in this regard. Proof of this can be found in inspection of literature we have issued, the articles we have sent out for publication in the press, the speeches of Four-Minute Men, and all the other varied activities of the Committee. I dispute flatly your assertion that after three years of German warfare the people of the United States are still ignorant of German savagery, just as I dispute flatly your assumption that the speeches of the President of the United States, defining the causes of war, have not been read by anyone. The people of the United States *do* understand, and the proof of it lies in the fact that the mothers of the country have given their sons to the Selective Service Law without question, that every Liberty Loan has been oversubscribed, and that no request of government has ever lacked complete response. Perhaps it is that this very indomitableness of resolve, this iron determination, leaves no room for the manifestations of surface passion.

As a lifelong admirer of Thomas Paine, carrying admiration to the point of writing a book in his vindication, I learned still another fundamental of propaganda from the study of his works. Many people believe that public opinion—the keystone in the arch of

morale—is a state of mind, formed and changed by the events of the day; a combination of kaleidoscope and weathercock. At every point Paine dissented from this theory, denying that public opinion had its rise in the emotions and was tipped from one extreme to the other by every passing rumor and every gust of passion. On the contrary, he proceeded upon the assumption that it had its source in the minds of people, its base in reason, and expressed slow-formed convictions rather than the excitement of the moment. In every issue of the *Crisis*, every issue of *Common Sense*, he provided “information” for the “formation” of public opinion. True, he argued mightily in every pamphlet, but always from the facts in the case. There again he set a pattern. In totalitarian states, where there are no such things as free speech and a free press, people are compelled to accept what is handed out to them by the censor and the propagandist. In a democracy, however, nothing is more imperative than that the people be given full information and exact information. A feeling that they are being kept in the dark, or an impairment of popular confidence in the news, lessens morale quickly and often-times fatally.

This applies not only to the war-making branches of government, both when preparing for war and when war comes, but also the policy-making branches. Throughout the entire period of neutrality, for example, Woodrow Wilson took no action except in full view of the people. His notes to the imperial German government, instead of being mere diplomatic exchanges designed to secure redress for certain wrongs, were presentations of fact with specific purpose to form public opinion by informing it. Examine his speeches and state papers, and it will be seen that never at any time did he deal in flat statements or present conclusions without his reasons for making them. Neither during the neutrality period nor afterward did he permit public opinion to become confused or bewildered. Invariably he briefed the case, then argued from that brief, and, as a result, a whole people backed him up when he went before Congress with his war message.

The committee turned to pamphleteering—as every propagandist must—not only because I like Paine’s pattern but because we could not rely upon the press to create the kind of public opinion

that expresses slow-formed convictions based on facts. A newspaper, chronicling only the events of the day, and dying with the day that gives it birth, is of no value when the objective is a firm and enduring morale. As a consequence, I drafted Guy Stanton Ford, then dean of the University of Minnesota, and under his brilliant direction the foremost historians of the country were called together for pamphlet production. For their guidance two aims were set down; the first was to make America's own purpose and own ideals clear to both ourselves and to the world, whether ally or enemy. The sane execution of this purpose, involving a presentation of what democracy meant to its own people and to all forward-looking peoples, had greater implications than the war needs of the moment. Almost equally important from the standpoint of national morale was a thorough presentation of the aims, methods, and ideals of the dynastic and feudal government of Germany. Both aims were realized, and I say again, as I said at the time, that no nation ever made a clearer or more truthful presentation of its case, not only to its own people, but to the world. Of all the mass of matter issued by Professor Ford's division, dealing with thousands of facts, only one public charge of misstatement was ever voiced, and this was followed by an apology.

All in all, more than seventy-five million copies of our pamphlets went into American homes, all upon direct request. This does not include the circulation given by metropolitan dailies that printed many of the pamphlets in full, nor does it take account of the hundreds of thousands of copies printed by state organizations and even by private individuals. These figures tell something of their usefulness, but not all. The pamphlets were an arsenal from which our speakers drew material, particularly the Four-Minute Men. At this point I differ from President Roosevelt in his high estimate of "cracker-barrel conversations." The committee organized public discussion and stimulated it in every possible manner, believing that it was wise and proper to substitute the logic and reason of the platform for the ignorances and passions of the curbstone.

Aside from the disclosure of military secrets and treasonable utterances, we stood for the ultimate in free speech. What greater mockery than to fight for democracy abroad and undermine it at

home! Here again is something for the propagandist to bear in mind: at all times he must be on guard against contradictions.

If I have seemed to stress unduly and tiresomely the activities of the Committee on Public Information, it is because I know of no other way to make clear my own conception of propaganda in its relation to morale. A free people cannot be told what to think. They must be given the facts and permitted to do their own thinking. Trying to fool, wheedle, or cheat them is a blunder of magnitude, for I say again that people want the truth, demand the truth, and have an instinct for the truth. When Winston Churchill turned away from "goose-stuffing" and told his people frankly that he could offer them only "blood, sweat, and tears," he laid bedrock foundations for their morale. Does anyone imagine for a split second that the Germans could take it as the English have taken it? No, for their morale is built on lies, and when the tide of battle turns, the Reich's civilian population will curl up just as it curled up in 1918.

Just one point more, and I am done. Hitler, in *Mein Kampf*, warns against pitching propaganda on any "idealistic note." So far from agreeing with him, I hold that it is only to a note of high idealism that people respond. Even Germans! Civilized people can never be made to accept war as inevitable and ennobling, and the propagandist who attempts any such task is digging a pit for himself and his cause. The bloody business of wholesale slaughter must be illumined by a ray of hope if the struggle is to enlist heart and soul, and even as Thomas Paine made freedom his battle cry, holding up independence as an ideal for the inspiration of the colonists, so was the committee's propaganda based entirely on Woodrow Wilson's great slogan, "a war to end war." The whole world, sick of the dog-eat-dog tradition, rose in gladness at his call. Everywhere people looked with new eyes upon the horror of destruction that had laid Europe waste and saw it as the logical consequence of tribal hates and superstitions. The thundering ideals of the President imparted a sublime militancy to the innate pacifism of America. A war against war! Mothers gave their sons that the dream might be made to come true, and men went to death with a new courage. The Allied governments accepted the principles of the League of Nations as though

they had come down from Sinai, and neutral nations rallied to our cause. The great ideal, reaching the deluded peoples of the Central Powers, undermined the structure of lies and fears that kept their souls in shadow. The collapse of the Prussian war machine was not physical only but a sheer spiritual disintegration as well. Nothing is more certain than that German reverses will cause it to happen again, for what Goebbels puts out is not propaganda in any true sense of the word but tom-tom beating and tribal incantations.

Unless, then, the lessons taught by experience are deemed of no value and disregarded entirely, the determination of an American propaganda policy would seem to have few difficulties. First and foremost, it should have its base in honesty, candor, and complete confidence in the courage, fortitude, and patriotism of the people. Not lies, not deceit, and not "goose-stuffing," but the formation of public opinion through information. Every activity of government should and must be opened up to the inspection of citizenship, for when all is said and done, war is the people's business and deep concern and not the personal enterprise of admirals and generals. Bad enough in peace time, blindfolds are criminally stupid in a national emergency. All of which applies to the White House with even greater force than to the war-making branches. Among civilized peoples, at least, nothing is more imperative than that a "case" be made for war, so that people may know exactly why they are called upon to take arms and exactly what it is that they are fighting for. In a democracy only the chief executive can make this case, for his is the only voice heard by all. And if he fails for any reason, the propagandists might as well shut up shop and search for some way to make an honest living. Nor is it enough merely to establish the justice of the nation's cause. Even as Woodrow Wilson, a president must look beyond war to the peace and sound a high call to the idealism that is the soul of the race. Then, and only then, will morale have its foundations on that rock against which storm and flood shall not prevail.

SAN FRANCISCO